

Dancing through Life

By Pam Knepper

Paul and Melinda Booth know what it takes to make a marriage work ... plenty of dancing. Married for nearly 34 years, Paul and Melinda met as students at the University of Illinois in Champaign. They married in 1972, graduated in 1974 and in 1977 left their Midwest roots behind to head for the Pacific Northwest.

"We wanted to live someplace where we could start a business and ski and be outdoors year-round," says Paul. "Washington State fit the bill for us." Settling in Gig Harbor, Paul started his own design-build residential remodeling business, the award-winning Booth Construction Inc. (www.boothdesignbuild.com), while Melinda traveled the country as a market research manager for CX Corporation.

Five years later, the couple moved to Federal Way and started their family. In 1984, their daughter Clara was born. Son Nick followed four years later. It was during this time that Paul and Melinda began to look at their work schedules and really examine what was best for their family.

"I enjoyed my job, but I was constantly traveling," says Melinda. "We knew it would be better for our whole family if I could be home more, so Paul and I decided it was best for me to leave CX and join Booth Construction as president. That way I could continue working and be at home with my family. It was one of the best decisions we have ever made."

While most married couples would probably not choose to work

together, Melinda and Paul have found it to be a rewarding experience when you have some ground rules.

"From the very beginning we set up defined areas of responsibility and made it a policy not to talk about business outside the office," says Paul. "For us, this arrangement has worked out beautifully. I couldn't imagine not working with Melinda. We see ourselves working as a team, helping our customers transform their homes through remodeling. For both of us, it has been a true pleasure coming to the office for the last 21 years."

After living in Federal Way for 10 years, the family decided to move to Mercer Island in 1994. "We wanted great schools and to expand our business in a high-demand market," says Paul. "Mercer Island gives us all those things."

Always conscientious about working out, the Booths decided to join the Bellevue Club in 1995. "We wanted a place where we could participate in different fitness classes and do these classes together," says Paul. "At that time I was also looking for a new and different activity for us to learn and enjoy

together. I wanted something fun that would expand our capabilities and knowledge."

Seeing advertisements for Ballroom Dance classes offered at the Club, the Booths decided to give it a try. The second class they completed was West Coast Swing.

"As soon as we tried West Coast Swing, we knew this type of dancing was for us," says Melinda. "West Coast Swing is mainly a social dance, with a new partner at the outset of every song. It is a wonderful way in which to express ourselves and we both immediately loved the challenge of this dance."

Their enthusiasm didn't stop there. Soon the couple was taking more classes and perfecting their technique. Classes led to local competitions, followed quickly by national competitions, judging, teaching and DJing.

In addition to social dancing, the Booths love West Coast Swing competitions, which are offered in three different formats—Jack 'n' Jill, Strictly Swing and Classic.

"With Jack 'n' Jill you enter as an individual dancer and are paired up with someone you have never met or danced with before," says Melinda. "They don't tell you what



your music will be ahead of time. This can be particularly challenging, but at the same time, this type of competition teaches you to be extremely flexible."

Strictly Swing involves knowing your partner ahead of time, but not the music.

"I like this type of competition because I enjoy employing every bit of skill with a partner who can improvise right along with me," says Paul.

In Classic competition you know your partner, choose your music and choreograph a routine ahead of time to perform for the audience.

"Paul and I have just started competing in the Classic category," says Melinda. "When your partner, music, and moves are all known, you can really focus on your dance technique, plus learn showmanship and presentation."

Recently, Melinda and Paul put their skills to the test at the U.S. Open Swing Dance Championships in Anaheim, California. They competed with 16 couples in the Classic competition and placed in the middle of the group. "We were very proud to be able to compete with some of the best West Coast Swing dancers in the nation," says Paul. "In our minds, it is a major accomplishment just to perform in front of 1,500 people."

Along with competing, the Booths also judge many local and national competitions. "We initially got into judging because we thought it was important to add to the local pool of judges," says Melinda. "It has been a lot of fun for us to experience what it is like to be a judge, rather than just a dancer.

It gives you even greater appreciation for West Coast Swing."

Paul and Melinda love swing dancing so much, three years ago they began renting out the

Kirkland Dance Center every Saturday night to provide a fun place for people to come and dance West Coast Swing.

"Our weekly gathering is known as Song Scout Saturday and it has definitely become the place to be for the ultimate weekly social swing dance experience," says Paul. "Why? Because I serve as the DJ and play music that is fun to dance to! I love that couples and singles are all welcome, because in West Coast Swing social dance, trading partners is part of the fun."

When Paul and Melinda are not on the dance floor at Song Scout Saturday, they are busy teaching group and private lessons.

"Over the years we have learned quite a lot about swing dance and what it takes to be really good at it," says Melinda. "Private lessons are very important because as a teacher you can focus on the needs of each individual dancer, rather than trying to address those issues in a group lesson format. My favorite teaching moment was when we taught my daughter and her fiancé to dance for their wedding. Their dance was beautiful and the smiles on their faces were priceless."

When asked why they enjoy swing dancing so much, both jump at the chance to respond.

"For me, swing dancing is like brain candy. I love it because my partner and I are artistically creating something new together," says Paul. "Plus, because swing dancing demands all your attention, it allows me to forget about life's challenges and just concentrate on dancing."

Melinda agrees with Paul's assessment, but adds that swing dancing combines her three favorite things—people, music and exercise. "It is also an activity with a flexible schedule for busy parents and professionals. In the Seattle area you can choose from five nights of dancing every week. At each dance you arrive and depart when you want—

try doing that when you golf or ski." Nationally, there are 48 weekend conventions available for a more highly charged dance experience. The Booths attended 11 of these conventions in 2005.

Dancing appeals to people from all walks of life. The Booths have enjoyed meeting people from a variety of backgrounds over the years.

"Swing dance attracts dentists as well as college students. Its attraction really does run the gamut," says Paul. "But when

it comes to a type of personality, most swing dancers are very self-confident.

You have to be a person who likes a challenge and isn't afraid of being a student. I have been dancing for 10 years and I am still learning and that's fun for me. I can observe my personal growth on videotape and on the faces of my partners. You are always learning something fun and different."

OPPOSITE PAGE: Melinda and Paul dancing at the 2002 Seattle Easter Swing, a Strictly Swing competition.

ABOVE: Melinda and Paul with their daughter Clara on her wedding day in 2004.



LESSON Information

If a person is interested in taking up West Coast Swing dancing or wants to learn more about it, the Booths recommend taking weekly group lessons, monthly private lessons and checking out their Web site at www.songscout.net for news about the local West Coast Swing scene.